Leaven

Volume 6
Issue 4 *The Small Church*

Article 7

1-1-1998

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Recommended Citation
Henney, Georgia (1998) "Challenges of Small Church's Sunday School Program," *Leaven*: Vol. 6: Iss. 4, Article 7.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol6/iss4/7

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CHALLENGES of the Small Church's Sunday School Program

By Gerogia Henney

Watching the movie *Field of Dreams* drew me back to my Bible college days, when I anxiously awaited the world of Sunday school classes before me and the impact that I would have on hundreds, maybe thousands, of children in my teaching career.

In the first church my husband and I served in ministry, I was assigned the nursery class. My first and only pupil was a freckly, red-haired one-year-old with a radiant temper. Stevie's favorite greeting for me was a scream. I looked for the church's nursery curriculum. Nothing. To calm Stevie down, I thought I'd try putting his picture or a mirror on the wall. Scream! I added a print of Hook's painting of baby Jesus. Scream! We finally both settled for my rocking him, letting him eat his Cheerios out of his cup. Stevie finally trusted me enough to give me permission to quietly hum "Jesus Loves Me."

Stevie and I met again in a different church when he was in junior high. After about two weeks, he decided he was too big for Sunday school. His parents decided not to fight it. My experience with Stevie contributed to my frustration and crumbling confidence as a college graduate in Christian education whose dreams were beyond the true realities.

In my thirty years since college, the largest class I have taught had eleven kids. I complained about it to God, to the minister (my husband), and to my husband (the minister) and my peers in ministry. Finally, I concluded that since at least 50 percent of all Protestant churches in North America can be classified as "small,"[1] maybe God is not bothered by my class size as much as I am.

Small churches face three main challenges in their children's Sunday school ministry: few children, representing a wide range of ages; few trained workers; and limited financial resources.

Few Children Representing a Wide Range of Ages

Over the years I have come to enjoy—even prefer—mixed ages in Sunday school. It reminds me of a family with lots of kids. Some are like foster kids who come and go, while a few will be there until they graduate from high school. In this family structure, the older kids tend to help the younger ones. Sometimes the children naturally group themselves agewise without adult direction. This scenario best lends itself to a less structured, yet well-planned, learning time together. Teachers who feel an "imbalance" without the closely graded classes are often overly concerned with trying to cover a certain amount of material on a given Sunday. But it is really the one-hour experience of being together for Bible stories, praying, singing, and interacting with church friends and Christian adults that makes the real difference in the children's lives.

Most teachers in smaller churches are offered little or no training before they begin, and once they have a year or two of experience, they are left on their own.

My childhood experiences may have contributed to my relaxed concepts of class structure. I recall going to Vacation Bible School in July between my fourth and fifth grades. Though only one month from turning ten in August, I had to join the eight- and nine-year-olds while those I considered my "peers" (ten-and eleven-year-olds) were in another class. Even then, I vowed I would never impose strict age rulings when I became a teacher.

Separating children from their different-aged peers can take some of the joy out of the Bible class experience, and there are small children who may be far more comfortable with their slightly older friends or siblings. A multi-aged group can provide much room for creative teaching as well as creative learning that isn't always present in the traditional closely graded classroom.

Several summers ago I enjoyed my favorite time for teaching children, despite an unpredictable class size. Growing tired of fighting with my expectation that "if I prepare, they will come," I finally had a peace about whatever number of students I had. I came to a spiritual place in my life where, as long as I was prepared for a group of up to eleven, I was still happy if only one or two came. That kind of unpredictability means that classes often do not go according to plan, so whatever we didn't do was just saved for the next week (this is easier with undated curriculum, which I will discuss further below). Flexibility is the name of the game for me, even after the best of plans have been made.

Small churches in rural areas may especially need to adjust their expectations of Sunday school attendance. Farm families do not always live by the clock. My experience here in Ellensburg has taught me that a calf born in the middle of the night on Saturday, or a Sunday morning snow, may mean that the family won't be in church. It has nothing to do with their dedication to the Lord and worship, but has everything to do with their stewardship of life.

Few Trained Workers

A second challenge is that most small congregations have few "trained" workers. Most teachers in smaller churches are offered little or no training before they begin, and once they have a year or two of experience, they are left on their own. Teachers in the small church can take advantage of seminars at regional conventions and church lectureships and of workshops at larger congregations. There they can continue to grow in their understanding of the various learning styles of children, age-sensitive conceptualization capabilities, large- and small-motor-skill abilities as they relate to classroom activities, and other "basics" for effective communication with children.

Newer teachers are sometimes prone to using the classroom table to add some of the formality that they perceive is in the larger church. It especially discourages me to see younger children seated around tables in traditional classroom style when it is not necessary. Tables are needed for some activities, but so many beneficial learning activities do not lend themselves to sitting around the table. No child should be limited to sitting around a table the whole hour every week of his or her entire Sunday school childhood!

If you have just been drafted into teaching in your small church, you can take consolation in the fact that teaching is always a "learn-as-you-go" process. A Sunday school teacher learns to teach somewhat like a parent learns to parent. First come the kids, then a lot of reading, a lot of trial and error, observation of the more experienced, and consultations with those who do a good job. For me, the joy of teaching children lies in part in the nonstatic nature of children themselves. Children change. I change. We have a relationship. I learn a lot from them and they learn a little from me. Every Sunday is a new experience, a new challenge. What can I do to help them see and know God's love? is a teacher's weekly question.

Many churches still have the assumption that purchased curriculum and student workbooks are the only safe way to conduct a Sunday school class for children, using a publisher's carefully planned lessons to "cover the Bible in eighteen years." But if a child's only exposure to these stories is during the Bible school hour, there will still be gaps in his or her knowledge of Scripture. There-

fore, it is not necessary for the small-church teacher to strain to "get through the lesson" each Sunday, or to fret over children who miss a lesson. The children themselves are more important than the lesson plan.

Limited Financial Resources

A third challenge to ministry to children in small churches is that financial resources are usually limited. However, even in the smallest of churches, funds are usually budgeted for children's education. Adopt this rule of thumb: buy things that last and that make a difference. A huge set of quality flannelgraph figures may be well worth an entire year's education budget.

Five years ago I spent about a hundred dollars on an electronic adventure game. A Bible version wasn't on the market yet, so I adapted it to create games for our lessons on David. Eventually, the older kids were creating their own Bible games. That gadget was always in use. When deciding how to spend your education budget, keep in mind that if it is going to be thrown away soon or outdated by next Sunday, it may not be worth it.

It's been years since I have used publishers' dated Sunday school materials, though I often use their teacher's manuals for ideas on which to build my own curriculum. My newly recruited helpers and teachers are usually reluctant to move from relying on a strict usage of publishers' materials to using them as a "guideline," taking off with their own creativity and gifts, but they eventually do so. I don't see myself as unusually gifted in thinking up things for kids. I just sit on the floor and try to imagine life at that moment from their eyes, at whatever age, and come up with options not usually found in print.

That brings me to the classroom. Try getting on your knees and walking through the door. What does it look like from the perspective of a child? Or a teenager? Does it ooze with "Kids-R-Us"? Or are the pictures hung (too high) on the wall merely remnants from the '50s, like Sallman's time-honored portrait of Christ? Have these kids ever seen the style of maroon couch pushed against the wall? Do you make sure the room is heated in the winter and cooled in the summer? What does it smell like? Are there cobwebs?

When was the last coat of paint applied, and is it a cheerful color that children will like? Count the cost. How much is a gallon of paint and a fun Saturday with a parents' painting party? How about letting the kids help decorate so it is "their" room? Is there a large space on the wall to display their creations or a sturdy storage area where supplies each have a special place? Are there plenty of "raw materials" for craft projects for all ages? Attention to all these details are well within the means of the small church.

Cost is not my main reason for not choosing published Sunday school materials, especially student workbooks. Asking a child year after year to merely color inside the lines, connect the dots, lick and stick the figure, or fill in the blanks does not take a lot of creativity, encourage individuality, or truly reflect learning (in spite of what the "goals" say). Teachers who do not think they have time to create more challenging activities can expect "kids of the '90s" to be bored, wishing they were playing electronic games at the pizza parlor. Creativity costs so little, but the lack of it can cost too high a price.

While I don't use published Sunday school curricula. I do take advantage of available materials. My most memorable summers have been those in which I used a Vacation Bible School curriculum (one lesson per Sunday) for an entire summer. We would use the first two or three Sundays for the kids to set up their room. Each summer was special. One year the kids covered an entire wall with mountains painted on butcher paper, while junior high girls painted flower borders that were placed around the room. Another year we pitched a tent where we went for story telling, and one summer we used straw bales to sit on!

The only real limitations we have in small churches are the challenges we decide we cannot (or will not) meet because we think we are unable to do things like "big" churches. Maybe that is good—if there are things we cannot do just like larger churches, then we must look to our "field of dreams," using our creativity to meet the unique challenges that small churches face in their ministry to children, keeping faith that "if we build it, they will come."

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Notes

[1]Lyle Schaller, foreword to *Preaching and Worship in the Small Church*, by William H. Willimon and Robert L. Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).